

CUR Focus

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A Capstone Experience: From Research to Performance

"...the greatest secret: knowledge combined with experience."

—*Bhagavad Gita, Book 9, v.1*

The senior capstone experience developed over nearly twenty years by the Department of Dance & Theatre at Manhattanville College offers a unique and very effective paradigm for undergraduate learning. Based on four years of study in dance, theatre, and the liberal arts, the year-long Senior Thesis Seminar employs traditional liberal-arts methodologies—reading, writing, research, critical thinking—as a foundation and stimulus for the creation of original experimental performance projects, all supported

by the critical feedback from faculty and fellow students (see Table 1).

The four-year curriculum has been carefully designed so that preparation for the Senior Seminar begins in the freshman year with Creative Process, a first-semester gateway course that introduces students to the collaborative mix of dance and theatre (physical acting and dance/theatre) and also to the integrated academic/experiential model that is the hallmark of the department and nearly all of the courses in the curriculum. Creative Process, which fulfills general-education requirements as a writing-competency course, includes

Table 1. Selected Research Topics and the Creative Project They Inspired

Fall Thesis Topic	Spring Performance Project
Social critique in traditional Korean masked drama	Dance/theatre piece on contemporary subjects featuring Korean masks and movement
The development of the rock musical	Rock oratorio based on the Madoff scandal
History and techniques of story theatre	Contemporary adaptation of Ovid's <i>Metamorphosis</i>
The influence of the early plays of Pope John Paul II on his papal encyclicals	Series of educational workshops on theatre and religion in a church setting
Site-specific dance and communal healing	Choreography based on events and aftermath of 9/11
Social media and identity manipulation	Original video
Dance therapy in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease	Original choreography
Drama therapy in the treatment of sexual abuse	Dance/theatre piece with masks
The drama of Oscar Wilde	Composition and direction of original play dealing with Wilde's life
Adaptation from novel to stage	Dance/theatre adaptation of the novel <i>Asylum</i> by Patrick McGrath.
The neuroscience of dance	Original choreography
The Adler versus Strasberg controversy in actor training	Series of workshops and a "lecture/demo" exploring the two methods
Japanese <i>avant garde</i> drama	Translation and staged reading of contemporary Japanese play
The influence of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes on the writing of Virginia Woolf	Dance/theatre piece based on Woolf's <i>The Waves</i>
Portrayal of women in Greek plays	Collage of scenes showing "Greek Women Who Kicked Ass"
Meyerhold's actor training	Series of workshops and a "lecture/demo" on biomechanics
Children's theatre for deaf and hearing audiences	American Sign Language/English adaptation of Anderson's <i>Ugly Duckling</i>
Theatre in the time of AIDS	Dance/theatre piece on AIDS
Use of drama therapy in drug treatment	Autobiographical play written, produced, directed, and performed by the student. This play was presented during freshman orientation.



The cast of **"Second Street: A Hip-Hop Pas de Six,"** the Senior Thesis Project of Candice Segarra, class of 2014.

(Photo credit: Candice Alcantara)

various kinds of research and writing. These include exercises in comparative analysis and research, in summarizing journal articles, and critical responses to dance and theatre performances on campus and in New York City. The course culminates in a series of collaborative ensemble creations, generally based on improvisational structures or "scores" provided by the instructors. These scores call upon the critical and performance skills students have learned during the semester and mirror what students will encounter three years hence in the senior year.

Following this gateway course, majors proceed on their various curricular paths and meet again as a group in the Junior Seminar, in which students write a series of short research papers and create performance pieces based on their research and/or prompts from the instructor. Here students grow into a working, trusting ensemble and gain practice in the essential skills of critical response to both scholarly work and performance, that will serve them in the senior year's capstone. During the third-year seminar, most students discover the topics for their senior thesis, subjects about which they care passionately and to which they will devote a year's work.

In the summer before the senior year, students submit a proposal for the fall research paper. Over the years, senior classes have ranged from five to eighteen students. The proposal includes an explication of and rationale for their topic, an assessment of what the paper might contribute to the field, their credentials (courses taken, intra- and extra-curricular experience), and five annotated bibliographic sources. Students are also strongly encouraged to engage their second area of study (minor) in this process, an aspect of the capstone project that allows for greater coherence and unity in the student's college career. Summer proposals are vetted by the instructor and returned with questions and suggestions (sometimes recommending a change of topic), thus beginning a dialogue that will develop and flourish during the following academic year.

The fall semester of the senior year is dedicated to writing a twenty- to twenty-five page research paper with the collaboration and support of a research librarian from the Manhattanville library's staff. (The college's library staff encourages this kind of collaboration by assigning a liaison to each of the undergraduate and graduate departments on campus.) Work on the research paper is carried out primarily through weekly one-on-one tutorials with the instructor and/or librarian. The term is divided roughly into quarters: one month for research, three weeks to create an outline, three weeks to submit the first ten pages and three weeks to submit the penultimate draft. Grades for the fall semester are based on the quality of the draft, which is corrected by the instructor and returned to students over the winter break. A rubric for the term's work is given to students at the start of the term and serves as the basis for mutual assessment (see Table 2). The final version of the thesis paper is due at the first class of the spring term.

The greatest obstacle and the greatest learning opportunity for students in both semesters is time management or, as it is known in the department, *the ability to dance with time*. To counteract habits of procrastination and poor management, students are strongly encouraged to designate four to five hours per week for work on the thesis paper and to treat those hours as if they were a class. This encourages students to keep their word—in this case to themselves—which is a primary pedagogical goal of the whole department. Those who do

not manage their time this way suffer seismic shocks as the term progresses. Other familiar challenges and learning opportunities include the organization of research materials and structuring and outlining the paper. Librarian Maureen Kindilian notes the challenges and rewards of caring for students with “varying cultural backgrounds and diverse disciplinary interests in the performing arts. Some students

had strong backgrounds in library skills, some had none. ... But all had ideas, which were forming and becoming formalized.”

From a psychological perspective, many students experience paralyzing fear in the face of what is ahead. None have written a research paper of this length before and though

Table 2. Thesis Seminar Structure

Criteria/Grade*	Superior A (19% A, 15% A-)	Standard B (8% B+, 20%B, 22% B-)	Minimum C (8% C+, 4% C)	Substandard (4% C-),D, F
Formal requirements	Paper contains virtually no mechanical errors.	Paper shows evidence of thorough proof-reading, and contains properly formatted footnotes and bibliography.	Relatively few errors in citation format and bibliography.	Paper is replete with mechanical errors. Paper does not meet length requirements.
Language use	Writing is lucid, elegant, and evocative.	Paper is written in a clear, persuasive style.	Paper is written in a relatively clear style, few grammatical errors.	Language and grammatical errors inhibit comprehension.
Demonstration of research skills	Paper demonstrates that student has exceeded research expectations, independently discovering new primary and/or secondary scholarly materials. Use of Interlibrary Loan or other research libraries.	Paper demonstrates some independent research (retrieval of information from a variety of sources); and recognition of appropriate scholarly sources. Use of Interlibrary Loan or other research libraries.	Paper demonstrates use and general comprehension of primary and secondary sources to which student was directed by professor or library consultant.	Paper shows insufficient research.
Content	Proposed subject matter realized and organized with outstanding clarity, originality, and imagination. Ideas presented in lively scholarly fashion.	Proposed subject matter realized and organized and with clarity and workmanlike skill. Ideas presented in scholarly fashion.	Proposed subject matter realized and organized with modicum of clarity and imagination. Ideas presented adequately.	Proposed subject matter poorly realized and organized, lacking clarity, skill, and imagination. Ideas poorly presented.
Evidence of improvement in outlines, final draft, and final corrected paper	Student comprehends and acts upon corrective criticism by assessing and editing own work.	Student comprehends corrective criticism and improves writing and research as a result.	Student attempts to incorporate directions/suggestions/advice.	Student ignores all advice and does not attend to recommended improvements.
Academic integrity	Student adheres to the standards of academic integrity, particularly regarding the differentiation of one's own ideas and those of others by properly acknowledging sources, as detailed in the College Code of Conduct.	Student adheres to the standards of academic integrity, particularly regarding the differentiation of one's own ideas and those of others by properly acknowledging sources, as detailed in the College Code of Conduct.	Student adheres to the standards of academic integrity, as detailed in the Manhattanville College Code of Conduct.	Student has not acknowledged sources properly.
Deadlines and tutorial meetings, (including pre-term summer research)	All requirements for submissions met; topics, outlines, paper drafts submitted by stated deadlines; excellent preparation for all meetings.	All requirements for submissions met; topics, outlines, paper drafts submitted by stated deadlines, student prepared for all meetings.	Topics, outlines, paper drafts generally submitted by stated deadlines, although some elements missing.	Important deadlines missed without valid excuse or notification.

*Numbers in parentheses represent percentage of students who achieved this grade in a sampling of 47 students over four recent semesters.

A Capstone Experience continued

they have had substantial opportunities to synthesize academic and performance skills during their college career, the idea of taking full responsibility for creating and producing new work and caring for a small ensemble in the spring can be overwhelming. The fear is conquered, or at least ameliorated, through developing and learning to trust the academic skills required for completion of the work. Work with the librarian and the instructor is essential and ongoing in this process. One by one, sooner or later, by dint of their efforts, students experience the joy of connecting with the broad tradition of liberal learning and gain the confidence of genuine accomplishment. At the end of the fall semester, students hold auditions for the ensemble performances they will create the following semester (each is allowed up to five performers) and engage in the delicate process of casting.

The spring term is devoted to the creation of original performance projects in dance, theatre, or a composite form—all of them rooted in the research done in the fall term. Depending on their topic and interests, some students choose not to prepare a performance, but rather to explore their subject through leading a series of workshops with their ensemble, culminating in lecture/demonstration. Students meet weekly with members of the faculty for a three-and-a-half-hour workshop to view and critique the works in progress. Each student is allotted about a half hour to present the work he or she has done since the previous showing and then receives feedback from peers and faculty. Students are free to invite other department or non-departmental faculty or anyone whose response might be beneficial to their presentations. Alternately frustrated and empowered, students begin to assume responsibility for their ideas and their expression. The greatest breakthroughs come when the student is able to let go of tightly held plans and expectations and surrender to the spontaneity of the work itself.

As they develop their creative works, students also learn to book and manage rehearsal time, collaborate with student and faculty designers and student stage managers, and create posters and programs for their projects. Each student is allotted a production budget of \$200 by the department for costumes, props, set pieces, printing, and production costs. Students use this stipend variously—all, part, or none—and some supplement this with their own funds. They create the scenic, costume, sound, and lighting designs for their own and each other's projects. The department's resident set and

costume designers serve as mentors and consultants, and the staff and resources of the technical department are available for guidance, construction, and support. Over the years, the technical department has been an essential production resource for the senior projects.

At term's end, all the projects are shown in a marathon performance festival for the entire campus. One of the faculty's greatest satisfactions is to observe a student present or perform in her own piece (and receive appropriate accolades from family and friends), then move to other spaces to become the light-board operator or house manager or performer in the projects of their peers. At these moments, the strategic scaffolding of the capstone experience is most evident and fully realized. In much the same way that laboratory research can draw upon the mastery of knowledge gained in a biology or chemistry class, the senior projects represent experiential research into various forms of performance, and they embody the fulfillment of the fall research paper. (The capstone experience is adapted to the curricular needs of our theatre-education majors whose fall paper includes curricular research and design and whose spring practicum is student teaching.)

While developing the skills necessary to produce both the research paper and performance, our students find the most powerful impact in the triumph over what at first appears to be the overwhelming challenges presented by the capstone seminar's requirements. Needless to say, this process is accompanied by considerable *Sturm und Drang*, tears and fears, fits and starts. Through the capstone process,

however, fear is transformed into creativity, self-confidence, initiative, responsibility, and self-respect—and some inspiring, adventurous new work. Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" is an integral part of the curriculum and provides encouragement to the class, as does the book *Art and Fear* by David Bayles and Ted Orland.

Assessment

Assessment of the capstone process follows very specific rubrics for learning methodologies and outcomes. Many of the practical, cognitive, and creative skills required for writing the research paper are mirrored in the preparation and presentation of the later performance, for example, time management, willingness to offer and assimilate critique, learning to distinguish and implement useful suggestions and critical responses based on one's own inner values and vision, and clarity of expression. In both the paper and the performance project, the critical process is governed

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primarily by the following concepts: “These are my intentions; this is what I want to say. This is the story I wanted to tell. What did you (instructor, peers, audience) see/hear/understand? How close were my intentions and their expression?” In T.S. Eliot’s terms, how much shadow—and how much light—fell between “the idea and the reality”? Our feedback process for the development of the performance, inspired by the praxis of MacArthur Award-winning choreographer Liz Lerman (2013), generally works as follows:

1. The work is shown.
2. Presenter offers her ideas, intentions, problems, and/or challenges, then reports on progress in rehearsals and notes specific aspects of the work on which she would like feedback. (Additional prompts are possible.) Before responding, the class and faculty need to be aware of the presenter’s intentions.
3. Praise is given first.
4. Faculty and peers ask pertinent questions about the presenter’s intentions, ideas, and goals based on what they have seen on stage or have heard from the artist.
5. Faculty and peers offer suggestions that may support or strengthen the artist’s intentions. Feedback is not intended to re-direct or re-choreograph another’s work.

The presenter is told that since everyone in the class has the student’s success and best interests at heart, he or she should seriously consider all ideas and suggestions. However, not everything that is offered needs to be included or integrated into the student’s work. An essential part of the learning process is to strengthen the student’s power of discrimination—the ability to determine what the specific project does or does not need.

Students collaborate with instructors in an ongoing assessment process, thereby developing skills for self-study and reflection on their progress. In fall and spring, rubrics are distributed with the syllabus at the start of the term. Throughout each term, elements of the rubric form a scaffolding and basic vocabulary for the work. Weekly dialogue with the instructor and other departmental faculty members allows for ongoing assessment of both process and progress. Assessment culminates in a two-fold process. In preparation for a one-to-one evaluation with the instructor, students consider their work in light of the rubrics (see Tables 2 and 3) and assign themselves a grade. Over the years, there have been very few surprises, and the overwhelming majority of students have assessed and graded their work fairly and in consonance with the instructor and other faculty members.



The cast from “Fair Haven,” Senior Thesis Project by Laurel Higa, class of 2014.

When there is variation between the student and the instructor, further dialogue ensues. Ultimately the instructor will determine the final grade. (Because of this non-hierarchical assessment process, only one student in 19 years appealed a grade to the administration. The grade did not change.) In addition, after all senior projects have been shown, each student submits a production book that includes the following: the original proposal, penultimate draft, and the completed fall research paper, the rationale and description of the spring project, scripts, director’s or choreographer’s notes, class notes including responses to progress of the student’s own project and his or her peers’ projects over the term, rehearsal schedule, ground plan and set design, costume sketches, light plots, photographs, program and poster, budget, self-evaluation, and one-page critique of each of the senior projects. The production book represents 15 percent of the grade for the spring semester.

The final meeting of the seminar is devoted to a critical, reflective discussion and assessment of the entire process by the class and faculty. This discussion encompasses not only the work completed, but also an in-depth consideration of the overall learning outcomes in the seminar: the ability to engage in and assume responsibility for independent research, both academic and in the studio; the abilities to dance with time, assume leadership, and provide guidance and nourishment for others; the ability to engage in the collaborative process, and the awareness of and assessment of personal and creative growth as a result of this process. Traditionally, a celebratory senior brunch follows for the seniors and departmental faculty and staff.

Each year the seminar itself is assessed by the instructor and faculty in response to faculty observations of students’ needs and input. Recommendations are made for the following year. For example, the shape of the research-writing process has been modified as a result of expressed student need, and in the spring, casting procedures, cast size, permitted num-

A Capstone Experience continued

ber of rehearsal hours, and length of performance have been adjusted over time.

In nearly two decades, no student has ever failed to produce both the research paper and the performance project, although some, for various reasons, have required an additional term or two after the fourth year. Inspired by their capstone experience, in the past five years (based on partial student feedback) at least twelve graduates have founded

dance, theatre, or film companies or started dance schools; eleven have gone on to graduate study; and at least 15 to 20 are working or performing with professional dance or theatre companies across the United States.

Concerning the personal and professional value of the seminar, Professor Ara Fitzgerald, a key player and strategist in the capstone process, writes:

Students in the seminar routinely achieve more than they expected possible when they began the year. They

Table 3. Assessment Rubric, Spring-Semester Performance Project, Senior Thesis Seminar

Criteria/ Grade*	Superior/A (20%A, 30%A-)	Standard/B (16%B+, 13%B, 6%B-)	Minimum/C (3%C+,10%C)	Substandard/ (2%C-),D, F
Initiative	Student consistently includes new ideas and concepts in rehearsals and performance, and actively seeks out ideas from peers and the instructor.	Student occasionally includes new ideas and concepts and asks for the input of others.	Student rarely explores new ideas or seeks input from others.	Student does not explore new ideas and concepts or include input from others.
Preparation	Student is always organized and prepared to present during scheduled feedback sessions; is ahead of schedule in gathering necessary resources and production book is exceptional.	Student is most often prepared to present during scheduled feedback session, generally on schedule with gathering resources, production book is current.	Student is rarely prepared to present, poorly equipped with necessary resources, and production book is mostly current.	Student is not prepared to show; not prepared or equipped with resources, and production book is not current.
Depth of investigation	Student deeply deconstructs and investigates her subject and has explored background and related material with great attention to detail.	Student investigates her subject and related background material with clarity and understanding.	Student is familiar with her subject and has explored minimal background material.	Student has not investigated her subject area.
Responsiveness to feedback	Student always respects feedback in both directions and thereby makes serious efforts to enhance her work.	Student respects feedback in both directions and generally attempts to include ideas presented.	Student occasionally respects feedback in both directions but rarely attempts to include ideas presented.	Student does not respect or include feedback.
Clarity of communication	Production is exceptionally clear and effective in communicating student's artistic choices.	Production communicates student's artistic choices.	Production only rarely communicates student's artistic choices.	Production fails to communicate student's artistic choices.
Creativity, risk taking, invention	Production demonstrates outstanding ingenuity, risk-taking, and original thought.	Production demonstrates creativity, risk-taking, and original thought.	Production includes moments of ingenuity, risk, and original thought.	Production fails to demonstrate ingenuity, risk, original thought.
Leadership skills	Student provides exceptionally clear and focused guidance, develops a strong ensemble, engenders a productive, organized rehearsal atmosphere, and is always respectful of cast and crew.	Student provides clear and focused guidance, develops a strong ensemble, engenders a productive, organized rehearsal atmosphere, and is respectful of cast and crew.	Student provides adequate guidance, a minimally productive and organized rehearsal atmosphere, and has difficulty respecting cast and crew.	Student does not provide clear and focused guidance and fails to create a productive, organized, and respectful rehearsal atmosphere.

*Numbers in parentheses represent percentage of students who achieved this grade in a sampling of 30 students over three recent semesters.

gain mental and physical muscle in this process as they keep going despite obstacles and learn to tolerate “not knowing the outcome” while they work to realize their ideas.

In a time when there is much discussion about the value of liberal-arts education, this process, which demands initiative, critical thinking and creative problem solving, leadership and collaborative spirit, represents substantial training for “the real world.” These qualities are valued in new business practices and can provide resilience in an uncertain market place.

With appropriate strategic planning, this capstone experience could easily be adapted and replicated at similar medium-sized institutions. Obstacles are mostly related to practical production challenges, rather than pedagogical concerns, which have been carefully articulated over two decades. In our experience, the raw material of the pedagogy arises from the students, and the faculty is charged with formulating and structuring the pedagogy, and, as deadlines close in, providing students encouragement and a steady knowing hand.

In conclusion, here are the capstone reflections of two Manhattanville alumnae.

During the research and writing phase of the year, I was able to uncover the process of what truthful, present stage acting entailed, so that in the second semester I had a clear path for exploration. I followed my thesis essay like it was a curriculum. I gained the ability to speak intelligently about the work and communicate the next steps of development. The senior seminar is an experience you get to walk into and through the work, you realize the artist in you.

—*Andrea Cordaro, '08; member, off off Broadway's Rising Sun Performance Company; co-founder Fusion Box Films, Hudson Valley, NY.*

In the seminar, I learned how to truly develop my own idea, and how to base this idea in fact and research. I could have gotten lost in my research in the library forever. I also accomplished a great “coming together” or unity of my thoughts and interests. Part of the beauty of this project was that we were encouraged to find something we were passionate about. Since my thesis paper explored the connections between theatre and religion, I took this work out into the world. Rather than develop a performance piece, I worked with a local church youth group and experimented with various theatrical activities to explore their faith, and the connections between theatre, performance,

ritual, and tradition. I now look back on my project in Senior Seminar as my first real realization that my gift in the world of the arts is in my ability to reach children and change their lives.

—*Beth Ferrante, BA, MFA in theatre education; full-time theatre teacher and arts-integration specialist at The Lab School of Washington, in Washington, D.C.* 

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